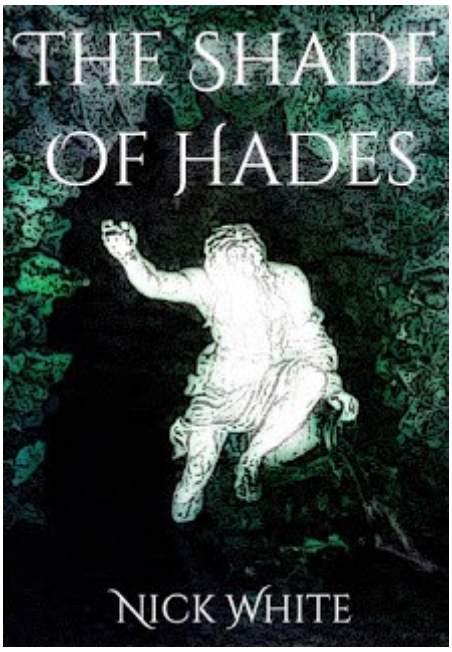

The Shade of Hades

“Then I said, ‘Sir, may I ask you, please, to explain to me what happens when we die, when we must each give back our soul? Will we be kept at rest until the time when you begin to make your new creation, or will our torment begin immediately?’”

Apocrypha - 2 Esdras 7:75

It is said that when a person dies they do not enter heaven or hell immediately. It is said that during the time between the death and the final judgment there is an interim period. They say that people are separated into two camps like the removal of goats from sheep. One group rests in paradise, as if in a walled garden, protected. The others are confined within caves in Hades or left to wander. And when this happens the soul of a person waits.

But it isn’t necessarily so. Nobody knows for sure as the way across the final river rarely has a return.

The irony was not lost on the dead man’s soul. She certainly had no body left (souls are always female). There was a moment of

joy. She had survived death – she had half-hoped, half-believed it to be possible. That was when the words came in a deep, low, fatherly voice, which held more sadness than malice.

“You only get to keep what you have given away.”

A particular judgement. A ‘chicken soup for the soul’ judgement as kitsch and trite as it was moralistic. For a moment the soul wondered if she had heard the voice once before. It seemed to her that the voice had haunted her dreams and the deep places in her life, a half-forgotten memory of a life before birth. But everyone knows there is no such thing.

And the joy was pushed aside by the tone of the voice. The man had been afraid of something like this, some kind of moralistic nightmare in the afterlife. What he hadn’t expected was the confinement. Or the thirst. Such a great thirst, as if her throat, what was left of her throat, was a dry sepulchre, blocked by a stone.

It had simply been a deep, matter-of-fact voice. If nostalgia were personified then it would have been that voice.

The cave was completely dark. Truth be told, the cave was completely dark except for some glow-in-the-dark stickers. But even though these stickers which lined the rough walls had an inner glow, the light was not enough to illuminate anything beyond the boundary of the soul’s confinement. The stickers seemed mischievous, as if they were winking somehow. The soul of the dead man knew that it was a cavern because her invisible hands fumbled and scratched at a dusty, cold, rocky floor. She could see nothing except the stickers. But she could feel.

At first there were simply tears. Feelings of regret and despair, of a life lived badly. *‘There is more shame than glory,’* thought the soul as she cried. The tears were a small mercy at the time.

Eventually her invisible hands grasped further into the darkness, reaching one of the stickers – all of the stickers had been part of a childhood gift made to another child as a birthday present (because the man had stopped giving presents when he grew up). The sticker was shaped as a cartoon ghost, part of a set of scary Halloween stickers that had once been highly sought-after in some playgrounds by a certain kind of child.

“Remember,” the sticker seemed to whisper, as if suddenly serious.

The soul of the man tried to find her body but could see nothing, even when she brought a finger close to the dim glow of the sticker. She was invisible, of that she felt sure – she thought she must simply be the memory of the man she once was. Perhaps she was a hovering orb or a butterfly. They always said that butterflies represented the soul. Except there was no flying to be done. And there was no free blue sky to soar into. There was darkness and there was confinement and there was fear.

She fell to the floor in despair. And that was when her invisible hands met something on the ground.

Coins. Handfuls of coins in a pile. The clinking of the coins echoed around the cave. The ghost of hands the ghosts of coins, the ghost of an echo.

A shifting. A movement and the soul pressed herself against a wall, still cool and rough to the touch but offering no comfort. Falling back to the ground she resumed her crawling. The soul thought back to her lifetime and fumbled around in the darkness sobbing. And then her hands touched something else on the floor. The shape was familiar. It was a packet of cigarettes and around the packet there were tens of loose cigarettes on the dusty ground. How the soul longed for one of the cigarettes - but there was no source of fire. Was there even breathing, or simply the memory of the breathing?

Still it was dark. Did time have meaning here? Did a sequence of events take place which could be formed into any kind of story? Perhaps that was what hell was – a place devoid of story. Certainly it seemed that it was a hell and it seemed as if time crouched motionless like a thief. All things had been stolen from the man. His health, his life, his friends and family. His possessions. His many, many possessions.

The soul stayed like this for perhaps a day, holding her soul-shape with crossed arms and rocking backwards and forwards. The weeping continued and the soul considered that this was her fate for a life lived badly, with regrets, with roads full of twists and never straight. That was when there were roads. Most of the time

it had been climbing over all kinds of fences that should never have been climbed, ignoring warning signs and zig-zagging through places that were not straight and narrow or walking the wide open highways.

In life he had not been a kind or particularly generous man. He had been rich. But he had not been evil, he had never gone out of his way to harm others (although that may have happened on occasion). He had been born into a wealthy family. There had been big mistakes. He had held little faith in a God of any kind. He hadn’t even believed in an afterlife. But the past meant very little. Except that, in the perpetual present of the soul’s situation, the past now meant everything.

What kind of punishment was this? But there was no room for anger, only regret. And the thirst. And the waiting.

Waiting.

There was no sun to mark the passage of time but there were noises in the cave. Somewhere on the other side there was a ticking. It had tormented the soul for the first day (had it been a day?) when she simply rocked and sobbed. The ticking had been like a voice saying - *'no-hope', 'no-hope', 'no-hope'.* In the end the soul of the man gave up the crying and forced herself to explore the cave again. Her shadowy hands caressed the dusty floor and she hoped to find some kind of light.

There.

There, a bottle.

A bottle. In an instant the bottle was unscrewed and lifted and the liquid gulped down. The taste was of vodka and within a few moments the soul had swallowed half of the bottle. Perhaps it was only the memory of vodka. Perhaps it was only the memory of the pleasure in getting drunk, but the soul remembered and the vodka gave comfort. It was in that moment that she decided that she would try to hope, if such a thing was possible.

Still there was the darkness. And the soul of the man began to ask questions. What else was in this cave with her?

Her invisible hands frantically felt further into the darkness, fumbling against furniture. There was some kind of chair. Why was there a chair? Was she to sit on it? The strange thing was that the chair felt familiar. It was then that she remembered it. It was a broken chair with a missing leg that had been taken to a charity shop when the man was upsizing. It was useless. And then the soul began to understand. She was in a dark cavern surrounded by the things which she had given away in her lifetime as a man. How slow she felt in this dark epiphany. That was why there were so few things.

Perhaps she slept. Time seemed to pass. Strange visions seemed to mock her in the darkness. Above all there was a sense of despair and hopelessness. That she was condemned to remain in this state forever. The didactic morality of it all had a sting to it. The walls of the cave seemed to bulge. Perhaps it was imagination, but it was all that she had. Imagination and the ghosts of the things she had once given away.

So she stretched out her hands once more and found a notebook and pen, a gift to a business partner. To survive, even to survive as she was, she opened the blank book and ripped out some of the pages. She scrabbled around on the floor with pieces of paper. The papers blurred in and out of her consciousness like a dream – like her mind was a mobile phone screen about to fade to darkness. A timed-out mind. She felt her thoughts slipping away, falling slightly to the right as a bone may shift in a socket and she fought to retain her sense of self. What could she write? What kind of plans could be made in this state? What kind of things could she read to help her? And still nothing could be seen. Perhaps she could do something. She drew a picture of the cave as she imagined it. She listed the things that were in the cave, exploring them piece by piece. She could see nothing that was written or drawn.

There were not many things in the cave, the cigarettes, a couple of bottles of alcohol – given as bribes usually. The glow in the dark stickers which winked and whispered. A second hand TV and a broken lawnmower which had never worked. A few other garden implements – kitchen utensils, the stump of a tree (a gift the man regretted when tree-stumps became fashionable in gardens). But at least it was a place to sit. He had tended to only give things away when he was compelled to do so or when it had been necessary to look good. Charities had never been in the man’s

thoughts. He had chosen not to make a will – perhaps if he had he would still be surrounded by all his possessions. Despite this, the man had never considered himself a miser – he merely considered himself prudent – a man of shrewd business sense.

How the soul regretted her stingy prudence now. So few things in her cave. The thought cut her – that she had been surrounded by the best in cars, houses and technology – the lair in which she had lived her life as a rich man. And now this. Now there was not enough. She had thought nothing eternal. As she thought of all this she felt that the ghosts of her hands were clenched tight as if still trying to grasp, as if still holding on to what remained. Life had been so dear and so intangible.

The soul rebelled once more against the forced morality of it all and she swore out loud. The echoes of her curse filled the almost empty cave and she began to cry once again. Biting against a God that had abandoned her in her greatest need. Kicking against the remains of a light now gone.

It was inevitable. The man had rarely prayed in his lifetime. It had been a conviction of his not to. It had always felt too much like a surrender. The man had been strong, the need to pray had rarely been there. Help had not been needed. But now the need was there. And it was now that the soul of the man prayed. She begged and pleaded for an escape. She asked to be alive again. She asked for help – anything. But there was no answer. She felt separated from God, as if he could not or would not hear her prayers. In the end she began to cry again. The tears were a small mercy.

There are those who say that tears are like a telescope or magnifying glass. Like a glass that can bring heaven closer somehow. Teardrops fell onto the ground, mixing with the dust.

And the teardrops seemed to speak in another whisper, a whisper which contained mercy, like a bottle containing water for a thirsty man.

'Deeper, dig deeper.'

The idea formed – it fell into her head with the voice of the teardrops. As if an angel had let a droplet of water fall from a fingertip into the mouth of a parched, thirsty throat.

The kitchen utensils included spoons and knives. She could dig.

Scrabbling over the dusty floor she felt for a spoon. And suddenly one was in her hand. And so the hope of hope of hope returned. Like moonlight from behind a cloud.

The digging took a long time. A very long time. She got through a lot of spoons and knives. The bottles ran out. It became a temptation to despair and fall into madness and the soul devised new, imaginative ways of keeping herself sane. She didn't entirely succeed in this. Especially after the first hundred years.

Of course she went mad. But the tunnel which she dug away at, clump by clump gave her some small comfort, some sense of purpose. There was, at least, no physical pain. Did life continue in the world she had once known? Were people born and did they die and did they share the same fate?

And there were times of despair, but in that sense it did not differ to the before-time. Had the memories ever been given away? There seemed so few of them as time passed. The upward slope was easy enough to navigate. It became a metre long, then two metres and so on. The clumps of earth began to fill the cave, burying the ghosts of the things given away. The soul didn't sleep. Or if she slept she had no memory of the sleeping.

Who knows how long it took? Who knows how full the cave was of soil from the tunnel? Time and space began to hold no meaning. The only meaning was the hope in the hope of hope.

And it took a long time before the soul broke through.

When she knew she had broken through she began to tug away clumps of earth with the echoes of her fingers. And these fingers touched other ghostly fingers. There was another soul. There was someone else. The invisible hands grasped each other thirstily. The comfort from the touch was indescribable after such a long time. Like drinking after intense thirst. And then there was a hole large enough to see something. The other soul had a light which

lit up the cavern and the silhouette of the shadows which they had become. And the other soul was as ghostly as the soul of the man.

A shadow. A shade.

“One day the Venerable Macarius of Egypt was walking about the desert and found a dried-out human skull lying on the ground. Turning it over with his staff, the saint heard a sound, as though from a distance. Then Macarius asked the skull: "What manner of man wast thou?"

"I was the chief of the pagan priests that dwelt in this place," it replied. "When thou, O Abba Macarius, who art full of the Spirit of God, pray for us, taking pity on them that are in the torments of hell, we then receive a certain relief."

"And what manner of relief do ye receive?" asked Macarius. "And tell me, what torments are ye subjected to?"

"As far as heaven is above the earth," replied the skull with a groan, "so great is the fire in the midst of which we find ourselves, wrapped in flame from head to toe. At this time we cannot see each others' faces, but when thou prayest for us, we can see each other a little, and this affords us some consolation."

Eastern Orthodox